

July 17, 2016

PART OF AN ONGOING SERIES ON
BIG WORDS (SMALL UNDERSTANDING)

Luke 19:5-10
I Corinthians 1:20-21
Acts 2:14-21; 16:25-32

SALVATION

There are words that carry huge significance in terms of the meaning and proclamation of the Christian Faith. Words like justification, righteousness, atonement, grace. And of course the word we will talk about today: SALVATION.

For many people, these words and the concepts behind them feel so heavy – so loaded – that they feel negative. And that's despite the fact that these words themselves are all incredibly positive: full of hope and promise; full of magnificent claims that are Good News. Yes indeed, early on these words were not thought of in terms of complicated or obtuse Christian theology. They were connected to and part of the very essence of the Great Message – the Good News of the Gospel. Would it not be wonderful to feel and be justified? To be truly righteous? To receive grace?

Even so, all Christian theology is aware of a great distance between us and God. It is impossible to get excited about the promises and the possibilities of the Gospel if we do not know or cannot face the realities of how much we need God, or of the transformations that await us if we begin to find reconciliation with God. Reconciliation is, of course, another one of those huge words in our tradition.

Anyway, most of you are not very interested in salvation, right? It is not a problem you worry about in the course of a normal day, is it? You either assume you already have it, or you figure it is likely to take care of itself as life unfolds. Either God saves everybody, or nearly everybody, or it will not matter anyway. So it is my suspicion that most of you go whole days at a time, even weeks, without worrying at all about your salvation. And whatever it is that people from earlier generations were concerned about, it is no longer one of our primary problems. Salvation will not stop poverty or terrorism or another great depression. It will not cure cancer or racial prejudice or global warming. At least that's what we think. So what difference does "salvation" make, and who needs it? And the corollary is also true: If we do not think or care very much about salvation, we do not get very excited about a Savior. That is one of the reasons there are so few people in here and so many people "out there" on this lovely Sunday morning.

Strange, isn't it? Early Christians thought salvation was the only solution possible for any of the major issues and problems the world was facing. Salvation was the hope of a new kind of LIFE that could be lived better than and beyond the major problems all of us were facing in real life wherever we turned. Thus they were fascinated with salvation and with how they might discover it and walk into it.

So we have these huge words from out of the past, but they are not very important to most people today. From my perspective, even those who still use them have usually reduced them and the concepts behind them down to tiny shadows of their former selves. Salvation today, for instance, is a picayune travesty of what early Christians were proclaiming. To them, salvation meant a dynamic and dramatic Life with God and with Christ Jesus – and yes, with each other – that would last from here to eternity. How did that get reduced to some pathetic little notion that we could escape some overheated premises in the current horror movie of a much later time?

To be fair, these huge words never did carry a clear and wonderful truth that all Christians claimed, understood, and agreed with. In fact, if you trace the arguments, the disunity, and the big fights that have gone on within the church itself, they nearly always end up at the source of some kind of disagreement over what we really believe, what the Gospel really means, what God really wants of us. Some people, like me, find this endlessly fascinating. Whether we agree or disagree, I do not think there is anything more important in life than to discover the presence of God – to get glimmers of what God is really like and what God wants of us. And if it is true that God wants us to discover such things – that God sends prophets, seers, friends, teachers, and especially Jesus, the Messiah, to reveal and disclose such things – then my interest and gratitude are boundless.

Of course, I am told rather frequently, and often heatedly, that none of this matters anymore. That is, a growing number of people are wanting to claim that if we just stop thinking and arguing about such things, maybe we can bridge more and more of the gaps, get past the divisions and disagreements of the past, and move toward a new and better unity in our own time.

Well, I guess that's not all silliness. There are certain topics we all learn to avoid with certain people. It is folk wisdom not to talk about religion or politics with some people. But there is a price for avoiding honest sharing. There is a stronger love-bond with people

who dare to let disagreements be part of their relationships, rather than simply avoiding all difficult exchanges. We can trade the “peace that passes all understanding” for the peace that passes over misunderstanding, but the price is high and the result is trading depth and truth for shallow and insignificant encounters. And do we try to keep peace with God on the same principles? That is, do we never let our prayers get into any of the areas where we might run into difficulties or disagreements with God?

Anyway, does anybody get converted in the churches of our time? How can we be converted if we cannot repent? And how can we repent if nothing is ever clear enough to suggest that we are wrong enough to need true change? The virgin birth does not matter; justification by faith does not matter; quarrels over Law versus Gospel are not worth thinking about; concepts of everlasting punishment in the fires of Hell are of no consequence. Everybody just kiss and make up.

The problem is: If nothing matters, then nothing matters. If the Christian Faith gets as drugged up and depressed as the society around us, who or what will ever deliver us from this “body of death”? One of the ways to discredit Christianity is to take its greatest words and its most profound concepts and turn them into such trivial, picayune, and insignificant little proclamations that most people will never take them seriously. And those who do try to take them seriously will get so sidetracked that their faith will no longer have much influence in the serious spiritual warfare going on in the real world. If we trivialize a word like “salvation,” we trivialize the life and purpose of Jesus. After all, if salvation no longer matters, then the Savior no longer matters either. Of course, this does not mean to imply that only a few are caught in this process of trivialization.

Johann Tetzel was selling indulgences far and wide in Martin Luther’s time. Luther was enraged. A few coins could purchase a ticket out of Hell? But which was the greater offense: the assumption that salvation could be bought, or the concept of Hell itself, which was terrifying so many people – in fact, the whole populace? It does not matter what we believe, except that what any generation believes in the name of Jesus *does* have a dramatic impact on that generation’s *relationship* to Jesus. And that in turn has a huge impact on the level of trust that generation has in God. To be sure, some individuals reject the party line of their time and end up holding a faith far beyond what is being told and taught all around them. Luther himself is a great example. So is Jesus, when it comes down to it.

In any case, our world has had a hard time outgrowing the connection between the concept of salvation and the fear of Hell. Vestiges of the reduction are still everywhere around us. Few liberal Christians admit to having any real fear of Hell, yet why is their fear level still so high? I know of no conservative Christian groups that have openly admitted that the fires of Hell are a faulty construct in the first place, or that images of an everlasting torment misrepresent the purpose of Jesus and the love of God.

So what does a Christian in our time believe about salvation? What is the significance of Jesus' coming to us? What does Jesus really *do* for us? Is there really a new and different Life available to us because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus? Was and is Jesus truly God's Messiah? Or to get down to it: What does it mean to be "saved"? And is there any connection between salvation and the coming of a Savior?

So I suppose I should forthrightly ask: Are any of you still afraid that you might end up in the fires of Hell? After all that Jesus taught, went through, lived and died about – after Easter and Pentecost have registered in our souls – do we still have a niggling doubt somewhere under the surface that maybe God does not love us? That maybe the tally sheets will come in, mercy and grace will get thrown out the window, and we will end up writhing in torment throughout all eternity?

Oh where is Tetzel when we need him? Could we not get lots more money into the collection plates by returning to the former claims that we can buy our way out of Hell? Why do we go on talking about tithing as an act of gratitude, a partnership we are invited into, a sign of our devotion and allegiance? Is it not cleaner and clearer just to claim that if we do enough good deeds, give enough money, and support Jesus and His church, then God will love us more than the others and we will have nothing left to worry about? Our world understands that kind of thinking, that kind of deal, that kind of arrangement. Why are we trying to make it so complicated?

Well, the Cross and the Resurrection make it complicated. Mercy and grace and forgiveness make it complicated. Even if none of *us* need such things, if *others* are finding such things to be real and true, that makes it complicated.

Anyway, if we are serious about wanting to understand or claim salvation, we have to start by throwing away all vestiges – all traces – of a connection between salvation and buying a ticket to get out of Hell.

Everything significant in Christendom is relational, remember? Salvation is not about a place; it is not about something past or present; it is not about something that happens to us once and for all. Salvation is not us getting perfect or having no further need for growth or enlightenment. Salvation is our acceptance of a trusted love-bond between us and God – a relationship that lights and guides our entire lives from now on and forever. Out of the darkness and into the light. Are we children of darkness, or children of light?

Concepts of Hell are trivial in comparison to the Message and Invitation that Jesus really brings to us. "*I will be with you always.*" (Matthew 28:20) This is not about getting dusted off, tightening a few screws, and then sitting on a shelf somewhere like a flawless ornament through all eternity. True Life is dynamic, and the adventure is endless. Genuine relationship does not "fix us." Has it fixed any of you yet? Do we not know what it means to get "fixed"? Perfection is stagnant, everything in place – don't twitch a muscle or change a single strand of hair. We think Heaven will be a row of photographs, all neat and tidy in a row? Why does Jesus keep saying to us: "*Fear not, do not be anxious, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom*"? (Luke 12:32) It is because the adventure is barely begun. What we have been through so far is only for openers. We are going to need a trust-bond – a love-bond of incredible magnitude – or we are not going to enjoy eternal Life at all. Do we really imagine that we are going to go with Jesus into the magnitude of Life in the Kingdom and never get our hair messed up ever again?

Salvation is awakening to a relationship so real and true and powerful that we will actually love Life and each other and our God, and we will never be afraid of any roller-coaster ride ever again.

What is the other side of this coin in the real world we actually live in? That is a simpler question than it sounds at first. The truth is that in our humanity – in our natural state – we do not easily believe in a relationship with God this full of trust and love. In one way or another, we have all been hurt, frightened, betrayed, deserted, mocked, rejected. In one way or another, this has been our experience until we are anything *but* brave adventurers, especially underneath, on the soul levels, where it really counts the most. And so the drama of Christian salvation is: How do we ever come to trust and love the God who loves us?

How can the Great Adventure begin if we do not convert – if we do not go through some kind of transformation that turns all our fear

and anxiety and disbelief back around into a relationship that truly loves and trusts God?

And now the story does get complex, but you know it well. We start out knowing that God cannot possibly approve of us or find us worthy of His presence or His Kingdom. Our flaws and imperfections are hidden, insofar as we can manage it. But they will all come to light sooner or later. So try as we might to be good and to do good and to look good, it is only on the surface, only for show. And God, who sees beneath the veneer, will turn on us sooner or later. Most of us have lived through seasons and times when it felt like that was happening already. So our suspicion and our anger and our resentment toward God are far from imaginary.

Along comes this so-called Messiah. He proclaims the impossible, even antagonizing all the religious teachings and traditions of His own time to proclaim the Gospel: the new relationship with God far beyond what any culture or religion had ever claimed or proclaimed before.

So collectively we turned on Him. What is the fastest way to discredit Him? Turn on Him and see how long He stays with His Message; it's an impossible Message in our kind of world. And if He really is a prophet, see how long before the God He represents shows the true colors and turns on us for not believing and cooperating.

Dangerous, to be sure, but at least we will get back to honesty and reality. So what was the outcome, at least on the surface? We crucified Him, and He did not turn on us. Nor did He betray or forsake His Message. And God did not destroy us either. God raised Him from the dead. A scathing, impossible response and vindication, under the circumstances, but all of it backing and supporting the Message – the Gospel of grace and mercy as Jesus had proclaimed it and lived it from the beginning.

Not everybody grasped this or claimed it. Of course! But many did, and many of us do. And if we do, that is SALVATION. The new, impossible-to-believe relationship is true and real – even for us. And when will it end? When will God go back to being the judgmental, hateful, punishing deity we have always believed that God really was under the surface? Well, any day now, but so far, we are still counting. Easter is followed by Pentecost, and so far the drama goes on. It is a broken world, but faith communities – faith families – are now possible in more and more places. And God still sends the Holy Spirit to guide and inspire us whenever we are willing to allow it.

Salvation is an ongoing relationship with the Messiah and with the God He came to reveal to us. What else would we expect, if we really do put our trust in Jesus?

So I am exceedingly hopeful that those of you here today – here and truly listening – will realize now and forever that salvation is a major and lifelong concept in Christendom. It is a complete aberration to reduce it down to some picayune little formula that can be put into a pamphlet or prescribed in a formula. I need you to know that this is not just some made-up notion of mine. So I will invite you for a moment into the vast world of my favorite biblical scholar, George B. Caird.

“The salvation of man is not to be conceived as the rescue of favored individuals out of a doomed world to participate in an otherworldly existence totally unrelated to life on earth. Man’s personality is so intimately linked with his environment that he must be saved in the context of all the corporate relationships and loyalties, achievements, and aspirations, which constitute a genuinely human existence.” (*Paul’s Letters from Prison*, Oxford, 1976.)

“Salvation is a threefold act of God: a past fact, a present experience, and a future hope.” (*Principalities and Powers: A Study in Pauline Theology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1956.) One without the other two is not salvation.

And of course, I love G.B. Caird because he never makes such statements without grounding them in biblical realities.

Salvation is a past fact

Romans 8:24; Romans 11:11; II Timothy 1:9;
Hebrews 2:3-4; Hebrews 5:9; Revelation 12:10.

Salvation is a present experience

Luke 19:10; I Corinthians 1:18; I Corinthians 15:2;
II Corinthians 2:15; II Corinthians 6:2; Philippians 2:12;
I Peter 3:21.

Salvation is a future hope

Romans 13:11; Hebrews 9:28; I Peter 1:5

If you read those passages, you will find out that salvation is a concept far greater and more powerful than present-day churches are making it sound like.

SALVATION

G.B. Caird does the groundwork for us. But by the time we have finished pondering the passages he has set before us, we realize that the New Testament world was far more profound and aware than most modern churches have time to notice or appreciate.

It might even cause us to realize and rejoice in the awareness that our Savior – Jesus, the Messiah of God – is also:

- a past fact,
- a present experience, and
- a future hope.

Salvation is the awareness that you – you yourself – are loved by God personally. That *changes* everything. That is the beginning of our New Life.

But even here, not everyone has that awareness.